DO YOU HAVE TO BELONG TO THE CHURCH TO BE A CHRISTIAN?

October 25, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Philippians 2:1-5
Matthew 16:13-18

"...you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church..."
-Matthew 16:18 (NRSV)

Charles Ives said that "there must be a part of the soul all made of tunes." I think about that on occasion because there are a lot of tunes playing around in my subconscious just beneath the surface, and occasionally, frequently actually, one comes to the top out of nowhere, and I find myself listening to it, or humming it. One of the tunes that does that for me is "There's a Church in the Wildwood." Do you know it?

I won't sing it, but here are the words:

> "There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
> No lovelier place in the dale:
> No spot is so dear to my childhood
> As the little brown church in the vale."

The second verse:

> "How sweet on a bright sabbath morning
> To list' to the clear ringing bell
> Its tones so sweetly are calling,
> O come to the church in the vale."

The refrain is the best part. The men sing:

> "O come - come - come - come,"

while the women sing:

> "Come to the church in the wildwood, come to the church in the dale. No place is so dear to my childhood as the little brown church in the vale."

I have never sung that hymn in church. I asked Dr. Simmons what he thought and he said he thought we ought not to ruin that record. It's in that place all made of tunes, I think, because my father loved it. He sang it a lot. He may even have sung it

to me. And I have been wondering why he loved that hymn so. One thing I know for sure is that he never went to a "little brown church in a vale." I knew his churches and they weren't little brown churches.

They were the Fifth Avenue Methodist Church - not Fifth Avenue, New York City. This is Fifth Avenue in Altoona, Pennsylvania, about four blocks from what was in his childhood, the largest railroad freight yard in the world, the Pennsylvania Railroad's staging area for all freight going west over the Alleghenies, which is to say it was dirty, noisy, rough. Churches in industrial towns are not often pretty. The exterior was black, the stone encrusted with decades of the soot and ash which fell constantly on the town. Inside, it was not what one would call breathtaking or beautiful. It was turn-of-the-century Methodist, pretty dull, pretty sentimental, and like the rest of the city, dirty.

So, why did he love that hymn? What that hymn is about I think - that nostalgic, sentimental image of a little, rural, wooden church sweetly calling children - what that is about is a universal disaffection with the reality of the church. He went dutifully, but not without complaining. Church was not his favorite place to be. From the way he sang, "Come, come, come to the church in the wildwood," you would have thought that he would have been wild about it. The truth is, he started looking at his watch the minute we sat down and if it went on too long, let us and everyone around us know his impatience with deep sighs, until finally he got out his big railroad pocket watch and wound it, a loud, penetrating sound, which signaled even the preacher that it was time for this train to pull into the station and stop.

The truth is that he wasn't wild about the institutional expression of the Christian religion - the church. He would have had a one-word answer to the question I have posed. "Do you have to belong to the church to be a Christian?" "No."

My dad's condition, I have subsequently learned, is widespread and deep historically. He has lots of company. The condition has a name. It is called "The Scandal of Particularity." And it goes to the heart of Christian religion.

Almost everybody, goes the argument, likes the general idea of God and love. Everybody likes noble principles. Christianity, however, is not about noble principles. It is about a Palestinian Jew by the name of Jesus. There are, in fact, no abstractions, no broad concepts, not even any noble principles in the Bible. The Bible presents striking particularities: a people, a history, a law, a birth, a life, a death - and then a people again, a church. That's what the Bible is about.

Duke University Chaplain, William Willimon, writes:

> "Many approve of both the idea of following Christ and the concept of the church. But they are horrified by the squalid particulars."

Author Annie Dillard, who grew up in a Presbyterian Church, pulled back from the whole process and recently joined the Roman Catholic Church, wrote an essay in a collection, Modern American Writers on the New Testament (Incarnation). Dillard wrote:

> "What a pity that so hard on the heels of Christ come the Christians. There is no breather. The disciples turn into the early Christians between one rushed verse and another. What a dismaying pity... They set out almost immediately to take over the world, and they pretty much did it. They conquered emperors, raised armies, lined their pockets with real money, did evil things large and small, in every century including this one. They are smug and busy, just like us, and who could believe in them?" [p. 36]

The truth is the church has always been a bit of an embarrassment. That is the tremendous appeal of television religion, I think. You can have Jesus without the church. You can have your salvation without all the messy nuisance of stewardship and pledges and the latest parking lot argument and the boiler malfunctioning. It's a good deal actually: never have to leave your arm chair, can hear what you want to hear, push mute when you don't want to hear and then, if you feel like it, send in a check.

The truth is the church is never quite what it ought to be and no one knows that better than church people. As a matter of fact, after the anti-institutionalism of the past few decades I think there is more self-righteous religious smugness outside the church than there is inside. Time was then church people looked down their noses at non-church people. Today, however, the person on the outside is inclined to say, "I may not be perfect, but at least I'm not a hypocritical church member."

In 1869 the first Vatican Council said "Extra ecclesiam nulla salus." "There is no salvation outside the church." John Calvin said it too and believed it. He might define church differently, but he believed it. Willimon says that church people, more than anyone else, know that is patent nonsense; that when the church says that, the church is saying more than it knows. We Presbyterians are quite happy, actually, to leave the matter of salvation in the hands of our God who we know and trust to be gracious, just, forgiving, and loving.

So our Reformation position is that of course there is salvation outside the church. That's not really the question I posed. "Do you have to belong to the church to be a Christian?" And to answer that let's look briefly at what Scripture says about church.

In the Gospels, very little. We heard the critical text this morning. Jesus says to Peter: "You are a rock and on this rock I'll build a church." The word church is "ekklesia" in Greek. It means "those who are called out." It is used only three times in the Gospels, all three in Matthew. Biblical scholars have been eying it suspiciously for centuries. Matthew is clearly Peter's friend. The account is written perhaps fifty years after the fact, during the period of the church's organization, that is to say. So maybe Matthew just sticks that in there to enhance his friend's position. And when you know the church as intimately as a minister does, you do wonder on occasion if this could possibly be what Jesus meant.

I believe that Jesus said it or something very close to it. I believe he called Peter a rock and I like to recall that the rock Peter was, was pretty rough, pretty crumbly at times; that a church built on him has to acknowledge that he wasn't exactly consistently strong and faithful: he was thoroughly human. What I believe absolutely is that Jesus gathered a company of men and women. There is no arguing that a company gathered around him, followed him for three years as he walked around Galilee, helped him teach and heal, and in the process of following bonded to one another in a unique way. I am thoroughly convinced that Jesus invited men and women to become followers. I see no evidence at all that he ever asked anybody to believe things about him as a prerequisite to following. I conclude on the basis of the evidence I read that men and women became believers while they were followers, some more thoroughly than others, some with intellectual sophistication, many with simple child-like trust, and that what they believed about him was not as important as their following, their belonging to the company of the committed.

So I think my question makes no sense. Church is what a Christian is. A Christian is a follower of Jesus who belongs to the community, the company of followers.

When the title of this sermon was published in the Newsletter, I heard from a good friend and supporter of this church, who is not an official member for reasons of theology. He wrote, "I'm interested in your topic. I'm even more interested in this - 'Do you have to be a Christian to be a member of the church?'" And the New Testament answer is simply that the church is the company of those who want to follow Jesus - that a Christian is a follower - a friend who in company with the other followers of Jesus, is trying to live in faithfulness to him.

Can't I do that alone? Can't I be an individual follower, doing my own thing? Why do I have to get mixed-up with other people? The reason is that other people seem to be the point of the whole exercise. The human community seems to be why God sent a son to live among us in the first place. It was not, that is to say, to make individuals feel good about where they are going to spend eternity so much as it was to recreate the human race, to establish a colony of heaven in human history, a visible reminder of the creator's plan for the whole project to love peace and practice justice.

To believe in Jesus - to turn to Jesus - to follow Jesus - is, simply, to reconnect with the human race. To know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior is to know your neighbor as your brother or sister. And it is church - the company - which is the visible reminder, and the place where that reality is acted out every week, week in and week out; a community gathering in love and forgiveness and for an hour at least - in God's praise and adoration - becoming what God intends for the whole creation. I can't resist my favorite Mark Twain vignette. People were always asking him why he didn't belong to a church. Twain said if heaven was like the Methodist Church down the block, he was glad he wasn't going there. The Church catholic - universal - the Church which transcends Roman - Presbyterian - Lutheran - Baptist - is the visible sign of God's reconciliation, a picture of the human family forgiven, recreated, redeemed and now poised to go into the world and save it from itself.

Of course, it's a scandal. Show me an institution that isn't on occasion. Ethicist James Gustavson has written that "the church is not only a divine community, it is also a human, natural, political community." [Treasures in Earthen Vessels] Or as one wag put it, the church is like Noah's Ark in the middle of the flood. The smell inside is so awful you might leave except for what's going on outside.

So, I am a churchman, not because the church is perfect, but because I'm trying to follow Jesus. And in the same way I have come to terms with his particularity, his humanness, the word made flesh and dwelling among us, so I must accommodate to the institutionality of his church.

I am a churchman in spite of my own life-long lover's quarrel with the church because I really do believe the world desperately needs the church and that there is a sense in which the church and the faith it represents is the world's only hope. I do believe the danger is always idolatry, making a god out of something - ideology, for instance, or race, for instance, or affluence, or security. I believe that history teaches a very clear lesson that civilizations have within them the seeds of their own ultimate destruction apart from some lovingly critical and hopefully redemptive presence like the church. I believe our culture, if left to its own devices, would simply destroy itself.

Apart from religious faith I see little reason to assume that the culture will generate the energy and impetus to become less materialistic, less greedy, less narcissistic, less violent, and more compassionate, just, tough and resilient. Professor James Fowler, in a book on values put it this way.

> "When we prepare our young for the good life, this is the advice our culture gives. 'Be sure to major in something marketable. Get a background that combines business and computer technology. Keep your resume always ready. If you are going to the top you must be within striking distance by the time you are thirty-five. You don't have time to dilly-dally. Don't stay with one company too long. Loyalty can be counter-productive if you want to get ahead. You don't have time for volunteer activity.'"

The church, on the other hand, Fowler says, is a counter-culture and asks a very different set of questions.

> "What seem to be your gifts? What kinds of things do you do well? What kinds of activities give you a sense of worthiness? What kinds of things do you feel that you and God can do with your life that will make a difference for good in our world?" [Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian, p. 143]

I think in all seriousness, those questions are our only hope, and that apart from a church to keep asking them, our culture is headed for self-destruction.

I am a churchman because I can't do it alone. Oh, I can survive and take care of myself. I can even do pretty well. But I certainly can't do much by myself to fix the world, to become part of the solution instead of part of the problem, to heal the sick, and bind up wounds, by myself. And I don't know how to be a light in the city or in any darkness by myself. But when I am with the church, I am first of all, one brief voice, in a magnificent chorus of voices which has been singing God's praise for thousands of years. My poor praying and singing and believing join that wonderful song of praise. And when I say the creed, my voice joins an affirmation that has been made every day - every hour of every day for 2,000 years. And when I bring my poor faith to God - my sacrifice on the altar - my money in the plate - something incredible happens. I become a healer of the sick. I house the homeless, and clothe the naked. My little light joins a beacon of light which shines in every darkness.

I am a churchman and I will give my heart, and more of my resources than I will give to anything else, because I believe that Jesus Christ is the hope of the world, not as a philosophic

abstraction. But I believe in the body - the organism - the community which lives and loves and serves and is the hope of the world's salvation and reconciliation and peace.

Sinead O'Connor ripped up a picture of the Pope and became a household name, but did you see the pictures of those two Roman Catholic brothers the night Dantrell Davis was shot, doing what they do every night at Cabrini Green, walking between the buildings, and when there is gunfire between gangs, walking toward it, offering their own lives in the place of children like Dantrell Davis and the 120 others who have died. That's what church is.

"The body they may kill.... God's truth abideth still," Martin Luther wrote, and the Church has done that too: Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Confessing Church in Germany, standing up, alone, to the Third Reich; Archbishop Oscar Romero, murdered at mass in his cathedral in El Salvador; Martin Luther King, Jr., our martyr, whose inspiration and spiritual home was always the church. That's what church can be.

And I believe the world's peace does come - as it came in an unobtrusive birth in a remote Judean town called Bethlehem. I believe the world's and the city's peace begins when children from Cabrini Green come to this church and learn to read and learn that they are not alone - that there are human beings in this culture - this world - this city - who care deeply for them and love them and know their names.

I believe that churches are a light in the city. I don't think that's a marketing slogan. I think it's the truth.

And so I presume to invite you - if you are not a part of the company of followers of Jesus - join us. Or join up where you live.

And I presume to invite you, if you are a part of the company, to renew your commitment, your love and loyalty.

And I presume to invite you to bring what you have, give what you have; your faith, your hope, your determination, your yearning for peace for yourself and for the world. I invite you to bring your resources, the gifts you have been given and to lay them on the altar. I presume to invite you to commit, to give, to follow the one who promised,

> "On a rock like this I will build my church, and the gates of hell will not prevail against it."